

From open air to club indoors, the city allows the game to chart its own course

New York upholds chess's coexistence

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New Jersey: As you walk into Washington Square Park in Manhattan, a staccato of voices greets you. "See what you have got. Any chess players here? Come on man, play a game."



The telex table at Marshall Chess Club from where US chess legend Bobby Fischer played the 4th Capablanca Memorial Tournament in 1965. The tournament was physically hosted at the Habana Libre Hotel in Havana. Fischer played from Marshall Chess Club in New York and his moves were relayed to Havana via the teletype machine.

Picture by Angshuman Roy

You try to figure out what the fuss is all about, only to see a few people engrossed in a round of blitz on concrete chess tables, while those who are idle are soliciting passers-by to play the game.

They are called the chess hustlers of New York. "Life is struggle, it's a hustle," says Marti Anderson as he calls out a curious customer for a game. "So we are hustlers," he adds.

The hustlers arrive at Washington Square Park, a 9.75 acre of green expanse in the Greenwich Village neighbourhood of Lower Manhattan early in the morning, find a concrete chess table in the southwest corner of the park, beneath the shade of old trees, under the watchful

gaze of New York University's buildings.

For each blitz round, a participant will have to pay \$10 and on a good day, a hustler can earn up to \$300.

Anderson will provoke his customers with a "will eat all your pawns", or cajole "yeah man good move."

Joseph Ray, another hustler, was up against two young boys aged seven, who had come with their parents. He was constantly peppering them up.

Anderson belongs to a generation of street players whose education came not from coaches or academies, but from endless practical combat. Anderson fell for chess in 1977, he quickly picked up speed-chess hustling in his youth, often playing high-stakes two-minute blitz games.

After life took many turns — a bitter divorce, 10 months in jail and the loss of his job as a drug counsellor during the pandemic — Anderson, now 62, returned to the game of 64 squares. "Chess keeps me going," he says.

True. Like life, it has an opening, a middle and an endgame.

Legend has it that the American chess legend Bobby Fischer honed his skills at the Garden, matching wits with senior players.

"Yeah, he used to be here in the 60s. Your (Viswanathan) Anand is very good. I like Pragg (Grandmaster Rameshbabu Praggnanandhaa), and (Dommaraju) Gukesh, the world champion," Anderson says. "(Magnus) Carlsen too paid a visit," he adds, lighting up a cigarette.

Anderson, a Black American, comes from the Bronx every day. "I start at 5.30am in the morning. It's a tough life."



Chess enthusiasts, divided by some decades, at Washington Square Park in the Greenwich Village neighbourhood. The picture on the left is from 1950, while the other one is from earlier this week. Pictures: Getty Images & Angshuman Roy

Unlike tournament chess, there are no silent halls at the Park. Spectators crowd around; there will be commentary on moves. Amateur participants often feel the pressure.

Washington Square Park has its own history. It is deeply rooted in LGBTQ history.

"It's a happening place. Always busy," Ray says.

A walk of 15 minutes from the Park is the Marshall Chess Club, one of the oldest clubs in the US. Tucked in at 23 West

10th Street off 6th Avenue in Greenwich Village, the club represents everything which the hustlers of the Washington Square Park do not. Less chaotic, more organised, less noise and unlike at the Park, you do not have to constantly look up to check that pigeons do not soil your shirt.

It's the club where Fischer came, practised and polished his skills. The venue is most famously known as the site of Fischer's "Game of the Century," a spectacular victory

against international master Donald Byrne on October 17, 1956. Fischer was just 13 years old.

"Marshall (Chess Club) is intense. At Washington Square Park you go to enjoy chess and be a part of the community," Madeline Weber, a chess hustler with a degree in finance and accounting from New York University, says.

"The chess hustlers try creative chess ideas/ openings, whereas Marshall is more positional and princi-

pled. It's fun to be involved in both," Webber, whose *maddie-playschess* Instagram account has a fair number of subscribers, adds.

"It's seeped in history," Garrett Reynolds, an Arena Fide Master, says of Marshall.

Founded in 1915 by Grandmaster Frank J Marshall, it's at this club that Fischer played his games in a tournament in Havana using a teletype (telex) machine in 1965. The table has a pride of place on the first floor of the house where the



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